

Elizabeth Vartkessian, Executive Director

Elizabeth Vartkessian has been investigating the life histories of those facing the most severe penalties possible in the United States since 2004. She started working as a mitigation specialist in Houston, Texas at a time when it was the epicenter of capital punishment. There she learned and developed skills aimed at helping decision-makers have a full picture of her clients.

After starting a successful private practice and obtaining her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Dr. Vartkessian and several colleagues created Advancing Real Change, Inc. (ARC, Inc.) a national non-profit located in Baltimore, MD dedicated to conducting high-quality life history investigations in criminal cases. As the founding Executive Director, Dr. Vartkessian is committed to having the history of an accused at the forefront of their criminal case. She has worked as a mitigation specialist with defense teams in trial and post-conviction cases in state and federal jurisdictions and is an international expert on the collection and effective presentation of mitigating evidence, as well as the standard of care required by the defense in death penalty and juvenile cases.

Dr. Vartkessian's approach to investigating and presenting evidence is informed by research. She is currently a Research Fellow at the University at Albany in the School of Criminal Justice where she is a researcher with the Capital Jury Project (CJP). The CJP is an ongoing research project sponsored by the National Science Foundation that seeks to understand how capital jurors make their sentencing decisions and whether those decisions are made in keeping with the law. The results of her research were widely cited by the American Bar Association's review of the Texas capital sentencing system. Her publications, which include articles in law reviews, peer review journals, and opinion pieces focus on receptivity to mitigating evidence.

In addition to having received her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Dr. Vartkessian also holds a M.S. in Comparative Social Policy from the University of Oxford and B.A.s in Philosophy and Political Science from the George Washington University where she was a Presidential Scholar. In 2015 she was awarded the J. M. K. Innovation Prize for her efforts to bring mitigation to all areas of the criminal justice process. In 2018, the City Council of Baltimore passed a resolution praising Dr. Vartkessian's efforts to bring human dignity into the justice system.